

Curator

SOME IDEAS...
DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING
PASTOR/PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS

by,
The Rev. Charlie Arehart

Problems...problems...problems! We pastors deal in human problems all day and half of the night almost every day of the week. We carry an unbelievably heavy burden! We often wonder if His "burden" is easy...and His "yoke" light. Coupled with the normal pastoral cares, many of us are often dragged into internal depression as we wrestle with the myriad of problems "at home"...or should we say "Armageddon"? Some conflict strengthens us...too much conflict will destroy us.

"Do you have a lover?" "No, we broke up several months ago." "How about you?" "We are about to break up also!" Thus goes a rather common conversation overheard whenever ministers in the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches gather together. As we examine the list of ministers, there are very few who have long-term peaceful relationships.

This is a tragedy! Tragic because almost every minister in our Fellowship desperately needs and wants a "help-meet". God created most persons with a built-in need to give and experience love from another person in a very intimate way. Yet...we who are the counselors (physicians) seemingly are unable to help (heal) ourselves.

This is a problem...but, a problem which can be solved. It is the intent of this paper to offer some constructive ideas and to stimulate dialogue within our Fellowship. Hopefully,

we'll be able to pool our thoughts and share with each other. Perhaps two or three heads could really be better than one! Since this paper is being written so others will read it, I have purposely tried to make it readable as opposed to purely scholarly. It is my prayer that each of us will be able to establish loving homes for ourselves.

"Step One"

Perhaps we would be wise to consider the methods we use in selecting a partner. Usually, step one is step last...and we never do take the real step one. We meet someone on Saturday night...and become "lovers for life" during the wee hours of Sunday morning as sobriety begins to rear its enlarged head. During the ensuing week as our new "lover" moves into our apartment...we pledge undying and total love. How intelligent! Can our brains really be below our waistlines? Is eros enough of a base on which to build a lifetime relationship? Most of us will agree that it is not! We base this conclusion on the experiences of many counselees...and of course on our own mistakes.

Most of us need to sit down and take "step one". It is an internal step which we alone can take. We need to look in the mirror and begin believing at the deepest levels of our personalities that we ~~are~~ OK...desirable...and (with God within us) sufficient to live life. It is true that as we grow older this built-in need "to belong" to someone becomes an

internal aching. However, we must convince ourselves of the FACT that we can live life alone--and life alone is far better than life spent with the wrong person! Operating out of this premise, we are free from the desperation we so often feel as we "grab at" anything that comes our way lest we miss out on our "last chance". Take this step...and we'll be free to select a person with whom we are capable of building a loving relationship.

"The Needs"

After adopting the attitude of self-sufficiency, we should sit down and eventually write up a list of those qualities we need and want in a life-partner. This list needs to be fairly comprehensive, covering the most essential physical characteristics, mental and emotional qualities, and certainly spiritual attitudes we as individuals desire and require in another person.

Many times I've heard an individual say, "He doesn't really turn me on that much...he never did...but I love him...and..." Of course this person is in the midst of a troublesome period at home because his lover recently found out that he was really married to "Mr. Doing Everybody"! Think out which physical qualities really appeal to you...which qualities absolutely turn you off...and then keep the eyes open for those persons who meet enough of your ideals to satisfy you. Few of us have a single type...but we all have general

characteristics which an individual simply must have for us to be compatible. Likewise, be sure that Mr./Ms. Right finds you appealing!!! The physical aspects of a relationship are very important...let us never kid ourselves into believing otherwise.

Mental and emotional compatibility are crucial to the success of any relationship. Personalities need to blend... to compliment each other...to create a "working together" atmosphere. No person can really know whether or not another personality fits until many months have been spent getting to know that person. However, we can tell within a matter of hours whether or not a person is automatically eliminated from the race. I know that the loudmouthed "queen" just doesn't have the qualities I need...Adonis, P.K. (preacher's kid), rich, ect. notwithstanding! Make a rough list of those mental and emotional characteristics needed to make a relationship with you work. Look for persons with those characteristics! We should not be too picky...no one will have all that we want, but some persons have more than others.

We preachers are a wierd brood of persons! For us there is a very important side of our personalities which we so often forget when seeking a mate. We are spiritual beings...God is central--yet we so often settle with persons who are unable to share this beautiful side of our lives. I am convinced that many of our relationships were doomed to failure because we

didn't choose partners with whom we could pray and share the beauty of the Spirit. Perhaps Paul was wise when he urged us to not be "unequally yoked". Maybe he realized that sharing the spiritual is a part of a total-love experience...and whenever a spiritual person and a non-spiritual person marry they have a great part of each other which can never be shared...hence love remains somewhat incomplete.

As we go about town looking for "The One", let us ever remember that we have been called by God to be ministers of the Gospel. God's hand is on our lives...our task in life...our vocation...is a lifestyle! We should keep uppermost in our minds the fact that much of our social lives will be church-centered. Our partners need to be able to fit-in. It is unfair to force our mates to become involved. We need partners who want to be active in the life of the Church. Please do not think that there is a stereotyped person who is qualified to be a pastor's mate! However, let's face it...some persons love the Church (MCC in particular)--and others couldn't care less.

Only the pastor/s really know the complexity of the pastoral office. During the early days of the relationship we must share the real facts of our lives with the individual we're dating. Some persons just can't "cut the mustard"...and both parties need to realize this before we become too emotionally involved.

"The Needs" for a MCC pastor go beyond those required

by the average gay person...beyond those required by our heterosexual colleagues. Few persons are cut out to be pastor's partners. Probably the best partners are those who feel a "call" (isn't that conservative theology???) to spend their lives beside a person in the ministry. I am convinced that there is a Mr./Ms. Right for each of us who really wants a partner...but we'll never discover this person unless we first settle in our own minds the needs...and then go about finding that person who "fits the bill".

"Beginning The Relationship"

Once we meet a person who apparently meets some of our basic needs...rather than propose a lover relationship and move in, why not agree to date for a period of time? It would be possible for most of us to maintain separate residences...with concentration we could keep a rein on our emotions...and hopefully we would be able to realistically examine each other. It takes time...a lot of time to get to know another complex person. We would save ourselves many heartaches if we would get to know a person and slowly grow into love. This can be accomplished if we feel within "self-sufficient" and if we know those qualities for which we're seeking in another.

In order to date another we must schedule the time! Most of us are going at least twelve hours a day six or seven days a week...we eat, drink, breathe, and sleep Church. We owe it to ourselves and to the quality of our ministry to force

ourselves to take time out to date and spend time with that person we want to love. Our Deacons and Exhorters are willing to work...let's trust them to do a good job...and let's take time out to date and spend time with our special friend, so we'll be able to get to know him/her. A word of caution here: If we take time for that individual during the dating period, then we must continue spending "quality time" with that person once in a meaningful relationship. Too often we are super attentive during the courtship period, and then take the other for granted as soon as a commitment is made. Think for a moment, why do the needs of others always come before the needs of those closest to us? How many of our "emergencies" are really emergencies? A real emergency is one thing...but what about most of it? Do we really want a loving relationship? If we do, then we shall make the time! We must re-order our thinking and begin our relationships with the premise: My partner is as important as all other humans...he/she is more important to me than anyone else...therefore, given an equal degree of urgency, I'll meet my partners needs first.

As we spend time doing those things enjoyed by both, it is imperative that we practice what we preach! We need to engage in a lot of honest communication. Most relationships break down because the lines of communication have fallen into disarray. Just as this holds true for our counselees...so it does for us. Communicating is the life-line of love!

We communicate in so many different ways...hence communication can break down in differing areas. Non-verbal messages are extremely important...a look, a touch, a tilt of the head, a thoughtful deed. It is so easy to get busy and forget. Our thoughtlessness breeds insecurity. Many of our partners need constant verbal re-assurance, "I love YOU", are perhaps the most important words we could ever utter. Yet, it is so easy to get ^{so}wound up in "church problems" that we forget all about the endearing words our mates so desperately need to hear.

It is tough and often painful to communicate honestly with one we love. It is sometimes quite embarrassing! Yet, without it love ceases. Problems just don't go away...they grow more acute. Our communication patterns are developed during the early days of our relationships. As we date we must learn to talk with each other on the gut level in every area. Whatever develops later depends largely on the foundation we build during the early days.

"A Mini-Summary"

Thus far, we've covered a lot of ground in general terms. Many of the things stated should not have needed to have been written, yet, our lives prove that even yet many of us are not able to go about finding and starting a relationship with another in a satisfactory way. These are just ideas...a new approach for some of us...hopefully they will prove fruitful!

"The Partner...Pastor...Church!"

Moving from the base that we are either seriously dating Mr./Ms. Right or are in a meaningful relationship with that person...we must turn our attention to the biggest problem area we'll face. These problems are unique to pastors and their partners...and we need to take a honest look! We must educate our congregations in this critical area if we ever hope to maintain any kind of a relationship.

In most churches there are problems between certain persons in the congregation and the pastor's partner. We've experienced this in Denver during the pastorate of Ron Carnes, and also during my pastorate. I have a strong suspicion that most churches in the Fellowship experience similiar problems.

We must first acknowledge the fact that if the pastor has a partner, there are going to be problems between that person and certain persons in the Church. Just as everyone doesn't like the pastor...be assurred, everyone won't like the partner either. Conflict is inevitable! Personality clashes are to be expected! The right kind of partner can do much to minimize the conflict...however, much of this conflict is not the partner's fault...and a great part of it has nothing to do with that partner's personality at all.

One of the sources of this conflict is jealousy. Some persons related to the Church are very jealous of the partner. Some believe that if the partner were out of the

picture, then he/she would have a better opportunity to become "closer" to the pastor. Others are jealous of the pastor...if the relationship is dissolved, then they can have their chance to get the partner. This kind of jealousy is often secret, deeply hidden, suppressed--and the persons involved often unknowingly vent these jealous resentful (subconscious) feelings in somewhat innocent but hurtful ways. These persons are often the ones making the partner's road very rough--and they may not consciously realize why they are doing what they are doing. There are also those who consciously attempt to interfere with the pastoral couple's relationship. They are very much aware of all they are doing, and attempt to do even more harm. It is helpful if the pastor/partner/and the Church as a whole realize that these persons are afoot. Let us remember that we should always consider the source as we listen to the rumors about either the pastor or his/her partner. It is good to go directly to either the pastor or partner and say, "Hey, I was told by _____, that you did _____. Is that true?" Somehow, the Church must come to the point where this can be the way of life.

Then there are those in the Church who believe that they own the pastor, and they fiercely resent anyone or anything which takes him/her away from them. They believe the pastor has but one loyalty...and any threat to that is almost a personal threat. (After all, the pastor has been called by God

to minister...and ministers, having been elevated out of the realm of the human, are to be ministering all the time.) If the pastor didn't have a partner, he/she would have more time to do more work in the Church...and more time to spend with "me" personally! When these persons see the pastor's loyalty and time divided, they intensely resent it...and want this "other loyalty" out of the way. Usually one cannot consciously admit these feelings...they run rampant at the subconscious level...and are acted out in such a manner that strain is put on the pastor/partner relationship. Once again, the pastor/partner/and the Church need to recognize the fact that persons with feelings like these are in the Church. One needs to be prepared! It would be helpful if the Board of Directors, the Deacons, and the Exhorters would sit down with the pastoral couple and discuss these persons in general...and if one is aware of who they are in particular, then perhaps deal with personalities. If the leadership of the Church will become involved in this area...then they can act as a public relations team with the rest of the congregation to help these types of individuals understand the necessity for the pastor and his/her partner to spend "quality time" with each other.

There are those in the congregation who feel they have the right to run the partner's life.. These persons need to be corrected in this area as soon as they emit comment one!

Another factor which needs consideration, is the fact

that in the course of normal life and everyday Church administration, every pastor does some things which anger the Board of Directors and other members of the congregation. Everyone is going to be offended by the pastor (some in very little ways) at one time or another. Usually Boards and congregations secretly believe that they should "control" the pastor. During the pastor's "honeymoon" period at the Church (the first year or two), most persons are unable to act out their resentments of the pastor on him/her. So, they often transfer their hostile feelings to the partner making him/her the scapegoat. It is not OK to attack the pastor for his/her actions...it is OK to find fault with and attack the partner for his/her shortcomings. Now then, most church persons deny that this is the way it is, but they constantly do it! This is just a part of Church life. Each congregation needs to admit that some of the people do not like the way the pastor is doing certain things...and that some of them are taking their frustrations out on the partner. It would be good if each congregation could come to that point where they are able to disagree with the pastor...letting each do his/her own thing or think and believe the way he/she chooses without shifting the anger onto the partner. It is OK to disagree!

Many years ago a certain large United Methodist Church in Kansas City, Missouri, was sent a new pastor by the Bishop. He followed a very popular minister...and was received with some

suspicion. He had some obvious faults...and soon alienated a large percentage of the leadership of the Church. For a long time no one dared openly criticize him. Several months passed, and one day his wife decided that she would paint the bathroom of the parsonage red. Within hours after the Board of Trustees was informed of her decision, the Women's Society took up their arms...the pastor's wife became a villain...and most of those who secretly disliked the pastor joined in the "Red Bathroom War" against the pastor's partner. You see, these persons took their frustrations with him out on her!

Just as certain persons can't get along with the pastor, there are going to be those persons who simply cannot get along with the partner. These persons are occasionally the respected leaders of the congregation...other times they are persons little known. It is an OK thing to disagree with the actions of or the ideas of another person! Even if that person is the pastor's partner!! We need to educate our congregations to expect that certain persons just won't get along with the partner... and that it is OK to be a close friend with one person who is not well liked by another friend.

With these things in mind, let me now make several generalized statements which we need to share with our congregations in such a way that they will regard them as GOSPEL:

- 1) The pastor's partner is not the pastor! He/she is a person...an individual...an individual with an autonomous personality. He/she is not an appendage of the pastor...it is NOT "two for the price of one". He/she is a separate person!

2) The pastor's partner is a human being. He/she has feelings, emotions, and problems unique to his/her own personality. He/she has moods...ups and downs just as every other person.

3) The pastor's partner was created over the span of many years by a multitude of different forces and persons. He/she brings all of his/her past into the present. Just as the "yesterdays" of life determine "who" we are today...even so, the same is true of the pastor's partner.

Once the congregation begins living out of these basic premises, then the groundwork is laid for further growth.

Operating from this base, we need to communicate to all persons in the congregation that they can do three things to establish a good relationship with the partner. It will take work...and a genuine desire...but anyone following these guidelines should be able to build a good relationship with any pastor's partner. Here they are as I would share them with my congregation:

1) The partner must be accepted as he/she is! Don't try to change that person into your ideal. Live your own life to the fullest...concentrate on improving your own personality...then perhaps you won't have time to try to re-order the partner's life. Let the Holy Spirit change the partner as He wants...He just may not need your assistance this time!

2) Try to get to know the partner as an individual human being. Let him/her get to know you. This takes work!!! Try to understand "why" the partner has the personality he/she has. Help him/her understand "why" you have the personality you have.

3) Try to love the partner in the splendor of his/her multi-colored individuality. You will be able to love that person only to the degree that you know him/her. He/she will reveal himself/herself to you to the degree that you've accepted him/her. Remember, many of us are afraid to let another know us because: "Why am I afraid to tell you who I am? Because if I tell you who I am, you may not like who I am...and I am all that I have!" (Father John Powell, Why Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am?)

In other words, we need to persuade our congregations to:
Accept totally...Get to know...Love completely!

Somehow we need to spread the word that being the pastor's partner is a very difficult task. The partner is a special person who is in a position in which his/her ego is constantly being undermined. The partner takes the back seat to the pastor. He/she often "feels" in second, third, or even fourth place. He/she often resents this...and must work through these feelings. There are certain things...practical things...which seem insignificant to many persons which can really change the awful feelings many partners have. Let me list these as I would list them in an article to my congregation:

1) The partner has a name...USE IT!! Call him/her by his/her own name. Always introduce him/her in this fashion: "I'd like for you to meet John Doe, he and Charlie are lovers or partners." NEVER, NEVER say: "I'd like for you to meet Charlie's other half." To not use his/her name is to depersonalize that person and make him/her feel unimportant.

- 2) The partner has a mind of his/her own. Don't tell him/her what to do, what to think or believe, or how to act. If you want the partner to do something or go somewhere, ask--don't order or tell! You don't like to take orders. He/she probably doesn't either. Never tell the partner how to act in public or private. Just as your actions are no one's business...neither are the partner's actions your business. No one likes a bossy person...if you try to boss the partner around, expect to be disliked by him/her.
- 3) Recognize the partner's "pluses" and capitalize on them. Build the partner up with compliments on those positive points in his/her personality. Make the partner feel important in his/her own right. Every person has some good points...even your pastor's partner.
- 4) Always ask both the pastor and partner to attend functions when you know both are free and available. The partner should never be left out of any social engagement! Many pastors refuse all invitations which do not include the partner unless the function is during office hours. Sometimes when you wish to invite the pastoral couple to a function, ask the partner to check with the pastor and get back with you. This will make the partner feel more important...will boost his/her ego...and will underline your respect for his/her individuality. It may take more time...but you will be making a friend.
- 5) Respect the employment of the partner regardless of what

that is. If you dislike the job he/she has, then remain silent. You would never tolerate someone speaking against the kind of employment you hold--the partner should not be expected to tolerate unkind comments about his/her job either. A person's job is no one's business. If the partner is unemployed, stay out of the dispute and keep silent! Few pastors will tolerate forever a non-working partner. Let the couple work it out alone or with a counselor of their own choosing!

6) The partner's financial business is his/her own. The couple's financial business is their own business. Some couples tithe from their joint incomes...others give as individuals. Let the partner determine the size of his/her own Church contribution. No person in the congregation would tolerate persons criticising him/her for either not giving or not giving enough. The same principle must apply to the pastor's partner. (The size of the partner's gift just may be none of the pastor's business either!)

7) If you are invited to dinner at the pastor's (or any home for that matter) ask who cooked what. If the partner did the cooking, compliment that person. Always compliment the person who did the cooking. Never complain about the food--if the chicken was too dry or the mushrooms too brown--eat it/or don't eat it, but don't make any critical comments about it. A very innocent observation or corrective suggestion may appear to be a "slam". Compliment when compliments are due...be silent when you have

nothing good to say. When leaving, thank the partner for the evening as well as the pastor. All too often people thank the pastor for a delightful meal and evening but it was the partner who did all the work and deserved the compliments and thanks... and the partner is just sort of ignored.

8) The pastor's partner is not a second pastor (unless he/she is licensed by the Fellowship and is on the pastoral staff). Neither is the partner the pastor's personal secretary. It is wise never to call the pastor at home unless you have a real emergency. Social calls are fine...but after a rough day at the office, and since this one evening may be the only evening that week that your pastor has alone with his/her partner, your thirty minute social call just may be a little boorish! The pastor usually feels obligated to endure and be nice...the partner is hurt that someone is so inconsiderate of his/her feelings. Never call during the couple's meal time!! Never call the home to talk to the pastor when you are reasonably sure he/she isn't there. Do call during those times if you want to talk with the partner! If you do call for the pastor, and he/she is out, leave your name, phone number, and a message. Never call and then hang up when the partner (rather than the pastor) answers.

9) Never drop by the parsonage during meal time...unless it is a matter of life and death! Never drop by either socially or on business unless you have called first and asked if it would be

convenient for you to stop by for a moment. A pastor's time at home alone with his/her partner is very limited...uninvited guests are seldom welcome.

10) Never ask the partner to get the pastor to do something. Never ask the pastor to get the partner to do something. Always ask each individual what you want that person to do.

11) Remember, your pastor's partner is your pastor's main source of love exchange. Please engrave these three thoughts in your minds:

a) Respect the pastoral couple's times alone together. They want and desperately need time together...ALONE! And...there is very little of it!!!

b) Remember, the partner's first responsibility is to love, honor, and cherish the pastor. The most important task the partner can do is to make the pastor feel loved...and to receive his/her love in return.

c) Believe it or not, the pastor's first responsibility after his/her relationship to God and self is to demonstrate his/her love for his/her partner. The Church (you) come third! A pastor must honor God, take care of the self, love the partner, and then fulfill his/her call in life! The pastor has a responsibility--an obligation--a duty--to spend time with and communicate love to his/her partner.

12) Let the partner be as involved with the Church as he/she wants. Don't be pushy! Always extend the invitation for in-

volvement, but let the partner move at his/her own pace without making him/her feel pressured. Never, NEVER say: "You should do this or that because you're the pastor's other half."

Wow! What a bunch of "do's" and "don'ts"! These just seem like ordinary courtesies which we usually extend to all persons. Yet, in MCC, these elementary things are often omitted when dealing with the pastoral couple. Is it any wonder that the partners dislike certain members of the congregation? Some persons feel that rules of conduct can be ignored when dealing with a young partner...after all, don't older persons have the right to boss the young?

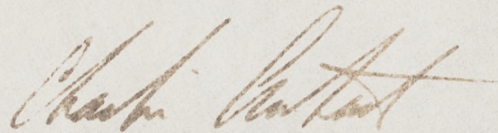
If one violates these "rules" of conduct, the partner will resent it! If the partner is young he/she will probably react out of his/her "submissive child": "Yes, I'll jump...how high?"; or out of the "belligerent child": "Go get _____, I'll do what I want!" If the partner is older, he/she may react with the attitude: "Go get lost and just leave me alone." Let's face it, whenever anyone comes at us from his/her "bossy or critical parent"...we react in a negative way!

If the pastoral couple is rightly matched...with work and patience the congregation can be educated. We must take the initiative in this educative process. Most persons are reasonable, and when enlightened will be most happy to be helpful. There will be some who will be offended. In those cases, we'll need to decide whether we'll maintain our love lives...or please those

persons. Sometimes we cannot do both!

Love is a beautiful experience. Many many gay persons maintain long term relationships. I am convinced that we ministers in this Fellowship can do the same thing. Let's think...pool our ideas...and work together toward this common goal.

HAPPY LOVING!!!

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Charles B. Carter". The ink is dark and the signature is fluid, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.